



Saturday, May. 02, 2009

Our View: We must get Wal-Mart done, right Merced needs distribution center, so let's not make it harder than it should be.

As the city has finished the public review process for the new Wal-Mart distribution center this week, we want to restate our view that the City Council should approve the distribution center in the proposed location.

In this Valley and within the city of Merced, in particular, we have a long history of making it hard for companies to start, grow and expand their business. That needs to change.

And we must get this one right.

EDAW, the company that wrote the report, must now answer all the questions and concerns.

More importantly, it must provide mitigation for those concerns that warrant and need solutions. This is critical for many reasons.

Most reasonably, they should provide solutions because it is vital that we are good stewards of the environment and the community as a whole.

We must remember that the land proposed has been zoned for this purpose for more than 30 years. If this process is done too quickly or done wrong, the entire project will be trapped in red tape.

Although the long timeline is intensely frustrating to us, we do understand that they are taking extra precautions to ensure that it is done correctly.

We do want to make sure people understand it is not just to avoid litigation -- it is to make sure all important concerns are addressed.

One of the most serious concerns we have is that opposition is fueled by out-of-town, anti-Wal-Mart interests that don't even care about our city. They will leave town after their opposition is done and never come back.

As reported in the Sun-Star and on our Web site on Tuesday, Sacramento lawyer Keith Wagner, the hired (or free) gun for Merced Alliance for Responsible Growth, was quoted: "Fortunately, litigation pays."

By his own admission, he has created a niche for himself that probably pays him very well. Our guess is that he could care less about Merced and cares more about his own livelihood. It really doesn't bother him that we have at least six large retail locations that are empty in our town.

As a community, we must also be very careful as we digest all the comments that are made.

Philip King, a California State University, San Francisco, economics professor, argued that Wal-Mart supercenters will be popping up all across the Valley. Rest assured that Wal-Mart is a much smarter company than that. A distribution center in Merced doesn't influence store-opening decisions. A large part of their success has been because of their distribution network that's already in place.

They will propose new supercenters based on sales patterns and return on investment, not a distribution center in Merced. One of our biggest employers is a Safeway distribution center, and there isn't even a Safeway in Merced County.

As the City Council weighs its decision, they must listen to comments and be careful to separate generalizations from fact.

Our community needs jobs. There have been anecdotal comments about that issue as well.

As reported by Sun-Star reporter Scott Jason: King, who has a Ph.D. from Cornell University, claimed many of the jobs created wouldn't go to Merced residents, and some workers could come from as far away as Livingston or Fresno. Challenged by a Valley resident, King said he would need to gather evidence. Our guess is that there are people from Merced working at Foster Farms.

There will be many more debates over the next several months and a lot more work to do. There will be facts and there will be fiction. It will be up to us as a community to decide for ourselves.

As a newspaper, Web site and media company, our reporters will continue to report and publish viewpoints on all sides of the issue.

Independent of that, it is our opinion that all concerns must be addressed and important challenges must be mitigated.

But in the end, the distribution center must be approved.

It is on land designated for that purpose. Freeway infrastructure has been addressed and is in place with the Mission Avenue interchange. And job growth is vital to our long-term viability as a vibrant community.

More than ever, our community and city leaders must get this one right.